Close to two million died in China during the weeks after the Zero-COVID policy was lifted

Benjamin Mateus
30 August 2023

The Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has not made public any real accounting of the death toll since the ruling Chinese Communist Party abandoned its Zero-COVID policy on December 7, 2022, and allowed a tsunami of infections to wash over the country, infecting upwards of 90 percent of the population.

Despite the deluge of COVID cases, inundated health systems and mass cremations that were underway, Chinese health officials persisted in minimizing the extent of the crisis, stating that at most 60,000 people had died between early December and January 12, 2023. However, daily reporting by the national ministry completely ceased towards the end of December.

On February 9, 2023, near the tail-end of the winter Omicron wave across mainland China, daily deaths began being reported again. However, the official cumulative COVID death toll stood at a mere 83,150, which was widely understood as a vast undercount. This was because only hospital deaths from respiratory failure and a confirmed COVID test was counted, which excluded those who were not tested or who died from other COVID-related causes or who never made it to the hospital.

Estimates provided at that time by the UK-based predictive health analytics company Airfinity placed the death toll at a horrific 1.3 million by the first week of February. Other university-based researchers had indicated a range of between one and two million fatalities. More recent empirically based studies have only corroborated these grim early estimates and modeling analysis of the catastrophic loss of life that took place.

Before reviewing these, it bears noting that one year prior, on February 8, 2022, before the Omicron surge began to chip away at China’s public health defenses, Our World in Data (OWD) had placed the official death toll from COVID in China at 5,700, at a time when the official global tally had reached a grim figure of six million and worldwide excess deaths were estimated at more than 22 million. The success of China’s Zero-COVID policy was unassailable.

However, perceptible shifts in policy and official attitudes became demonstrable after the March 2022 Omicron surge that centered on the Shanghai metropolis. In particular, the campaign in the international bourgeois press calling for ending Zero-COVID assumed fever pitch and Chinese officials were under considerable global financial pressures to end their public health policy and resume normal commercial relations. By mid-November, health authorities had rapidly moved towards a mitigationist posture, then opened the floodgates altogether on December 7, 2022.

Last week, a new study from the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle, Washington, published in *JAMA Network*, estimated that 1.87 million excess deaths occurred in China among those 30 years and older in the first two months after ending the Zero-COVID policy.

What distinguished this study from others was the review of empirical data and the use of Baidu, a commonly used Chinese internet search engine, to conduct syndromic surveillance, which can be used for early detection of outbreaks, to follow the size and spread of outbreaks, and monitor disease trends.

To obtain these estimates, the authors relied on published obituary data about deceased official employees at Peking University (PKU) and Tsinghua University (THU) in Beijing and Harbin Institute of Technology (HIT), in Heilongjiang province, from January 1, 2016 to January 31, 2023. They additionally conducted syndromic surveillance for the same period using unique queries in Baidu search engines for particular keywords such as funeral parlor, cremation, crematorium, and burial.

As the authors wrote, “Analysis revealed a strong correlation between Baidu searches for mortality-related keywords and actual mortality burden. Using this correlation, the relative increase in mortality in Beijing and Heilongjiang was extrapolated to the rest of China, and region-specific excess mortality was calculated by multiplying the proportional increase in mortality by the number of expected deaths.”

Not surprisingly, a disproportionate number of deaths occurred among men (76 percent) and the elderly over 85 (80 percent). The peak in deaths occurred in late December 2022. Every province, except Tibet, had seen a significant increase in excess deaths. The data also closely corroborates the modeling of the transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 Omicron variant in China conducted by the School of Public at Fudan University, Shanghai, in July 2022, which anticipated approximately 1.55 million deaths if Zero-COVID was lifted.
A second report, published in the British Medical Journal Thu rapid establishment of emergency control measures
across 342 cities, which included school closures, the isolation
of suspected persons and quarantine of confirmed cases,
banning of all public gatherings and entertainment venues,
and the suspension of intracity public transport and intercity travel,
resulted in daily cases peaking in all provinces outside of Hubei
by January 31, 2020 (875 per day) and in Hubei and Wuhan
city by February 4, 2020 (3,156 per day).

By February 19, 2020, authorities estimated that there had
been around 75,500 COVID cases. By late March, most
COVID cases had been brought under control and on April 8,
2020, the 76-day lockdown on Wuhan was lifted, with the
COVID death toll in the city kept under 5,000. Subsequent
analysis of these efforts indicate that had such measures not
been put into place, there would have been 744,000 COVID
cases outside of Wuhan by the second half of February 2020
and countless more across the globe.

What is often forgotten is that the early efforts by China in
the hectic weeks when the novel coronavirus began to spread
across Wuhan city and Hubei province provided significant
breathing room for the rest of the world to act and prepare their
public health infrastructure. That the ruling elites globally did
not heed these warnings to employ every measure to protect
their populations was one of the most egregious and criminal
actions imaginable.

An international campaign to eradicate the virus would have
had swift success and would have provided considerable
experience in preparing the world for future pandemics.
Instead, the world suffered enormous human losses, and the
pandemic, having infected billions, was allowed to return to
China in the form of a new and more virulent variant.

The Chinese Politburo succumbed to the demands of
international capital and joined the rest of the world in
following the policy of “forever COVID.” The fundamental
issue at stake is that a nationally-based elimination strategy will
always be unviable in the era of a truly globalized economy.

Most importantly, it is capitalism and not SARS-CoV-2 that
has created the conditions for the crisis and its persistence. An
elimination strategy remains viable, but only under an
international socialist perspective that places life above profits.